



The
Earth Stories
Collection

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Capturing the Brilliance in Chinese Cultures through Traditional Stories



Xueping Luo

Xueping Luo was born into a Hakka family in a Cantonese village in Guangdong in southern China. She has lived in Shanghai [east central] and Beijing [northern] and has travelled extensively in China and overseas, primarily as an interpreter and translator. Xueping has master's degrees in Responsible Management and Sustainable Economic Development from University for Peace in Costa Rica, and in Applied Linguistics from Beijing Foreign Studies University. In addition to working on projects, especially technical assistance projects, promoting the UN Sustainable Development Goals internationally, she is researching, collecting, and translating the fascinating folktales from the fifty-six ethnic groups in China and is a contributor and advisor to The Earth Stories Collection.



The Earth Stories Collection is a repository of myths, legends, fables, and folktales from cultures around the planet; these stories are capable of transmitting a complex-systems worldview and of illustrating the principles and values of the Earth Charter. I am honoured to be part of the team and am responsible for collecting stories from Chinese cultures. In this article, I share how I work with the enthralling stories, how I feel along the way, and how storytellers respond to one of them.

To people outside of China, Chinese culture appears to be singular. However, in actuality, there are 56 ethnic groups across China, with Han as the majority accounting for 91% of the Chinese population. Each of these ethnic groups, though associated collectively as Chinese, has its unique culture where we can draw inspiration to live a greater life on this precious planet Earth.

My deep dive into the diverse Chinese cultures for the Earth Stories Collection began in October 2021. I was fortunate to find in a library a set of fifteen books containing traditional Chinese stories, sorted by ethnic identity. In the preface, the editor-in-chief, Yao Baoxuan, reveals that he was already 60 when the books were published in 2014, and the original idea dates back to 1982 when he was dispatched to Xinjiang upon graduation at the age of 28. He studied Xinjiang literature throughout history, fell in love with the place and its stories, and started to reflect on how the culture, literature and history of all Chinese ethnic groups in ancient times had played a part in the China and even the world. Almost four decades later, I am

continuing the research and polish these gems, so they shine brighter to illuminate more minds on Earth.

Under the guidance of Grian A. Cutanda, founder and Executive Director of The Earth Stories Collection, I, as a volunteer in the project, read the stories, screen those that best illustrate the principles and values of the Earth Charter, summarise them for Grian's review and translate the selected stories completely from Chinese to English for the team's adaptation and proofreading. For the stories to be published in a book, *The Earth Stories Collection (Vol. 2): Earth Stories in Action!* [published in January 2023], I also review the adaptation and the comments for discussion following each story and carry out further research when necessary. Within a year, I read a total of 559 stories from 31 ethnic groups and shortlisted 73 stories for Grian's selection. Among the 50 he had read, 23 were selected, and 9 were included in Volume 2 of the collection. We expect that the next volume will feature eight more stories from Chinese cultures. Overall, the collection offers a significant opportunity, not only to expose Chinese cultures to other parts of the world through traditional stories, but also to find commonalities in traditional stories among different cultures.

In this latest volume of the Earth Stories, "Meibang Meiliu, the Mother Butterfly" from the Miao People, exemplifies the truth that we are one human family and one Earth community. "Mangye Sets Off in Search of Grain" from the Bouyei People demonstrates our common responsibility to one another, and "The Fire Bird" from the



Photo credit: Earth Charter International

Gaoshan People reveals the environment as a common concern, all of which correspond to segments in the Preamble of the Earth Charter. For Section I of the Earth Charter, Respect and Care for the Community of Life, “The Legend of Ali and the Fairy Maidens” from the Gaoshan People proves faith in the dignity and spiritual potential of humanity, and “The Siblings Constellation” from the Hlai People steers a way towards a secure and meaningful livelihood. Under Section III, Social and Economic Justice, “Recovering the Sun” from the Han People prompts an ethical, social, and environmental imperative. “Payahadu the Disabled” from the Dai People reminds us to recognise the ignored, and “Red River and Tengtiao River” from the Hani People turns our attention to outstanding places of cultural significance. For Section IV, Democracy, Nonviolence, and Peace, “The Goddess of Hunting” from the Nu People encourages us to protect wild animals from extreme, prolonged, and avoidable suffering.

These stories provide a glimpse into the fascinating treasure trove of Chinese cultures. Among the small number I have been fortunate to read, I have found all

principles and values of the Earth Charter represented in them. The top three are “Recognize the ignored, protect the vulnerable, serve those who suffer, and enable them to develop their capacities and to pursue their aspirations” (Principle 9c in Section III), “Everyone shares responsibility for the present and future well-being of the human family and the larger living world” (Preamble), and “Care for the community of life with understanding, compassion, and love” (Principle 2 in Section I).

All of the stories amaze me with their thorough beauty, as well as the ingenuity of the people who created them. There is significant imagination in all of them. In one story, the big dipper is transformed into seven brothers who sacrifice themselves to save their fellow fishermen from a demon and then continue to help guide fishermen. In other, four dragon kings, one in each sea, protect the waters. Finally, in another story, two rivers flowing in the valley are actually a pretty girl and an innocent boy who try to date each other.

Grian often shares his findings in these stories with such emotion that echoes my



awe of the beauty I find in them, as well as the ingenuity of the people who created these stories. Take the last story for example, “Red River and Tengtiao River” - it impressed us with how subtle and delicate the Hani People’s storytelling gives consciousness, soul and life to the features of the landscape. Thus, it stimulates respect and love for the rivers and all the surrounding geographic elements. Grian pointed out that the soul-giving is one of the deep features of the complex-systems worldview, which leads us to panpsychism

(https://iep.utm.edu/panpsych_), a theory which is being increasingly supported by scientists so important as Sir Roger Penrose. (see: <https://www.nbcnews.com/mach/science/universe-conscious-ncna772956>)

Exploring, discovering, and reflecting upon the traditional stories of Chinese cultures gave me utter pleasure throughout this research. Personally, I may have stretched the stories a bit far to relate them to the Earth Charter principles and values, and I am grateful to have Grian and the team’s review to keep my impulse in check.

When a story is genuinely too good to omit, despite a few elements on it that may contradict the Earth Charter, we consider adapting it. For instance, “The Mother and Daughter Gave Birth to Everything” from the Hani People is incredibly original and creative, and it echoes the call in the Earth Charter to “Affirm gender equality and equity as prerequisites to sustainable development and ensure universal access to education,

health care, and economic opportunity.” However, in its final paragraph the story goes, “When all beings grew up, they all wanted to be the master of the land. They had a match to decide on that, and human beings won, thus becoming the master of the land.” This statement is clearly anthropocentric; therefore, it cannot be selected to be included in this collection of stories unless modified.

The team adapted the story to current times in a way acceptable to the Hani People. Instead of “masters”, we imagined the human beings wanted to be the “caretakers” of all lives and the land. Alternatively, we thought of consulting a Hani storyteller for his or her adaptation incorporating ethnic insights. Although this story is not included in Volume 2 of The Earth Stories Collection, we may publish it in a future collection after we find a solution satisfactory for everyone without losing the connection to the Earth Charter.

Going through all the stories, I feel how connected different cultures actually are. There are so many similar stories among various ethnic groups in China, and stories from the Chinese cultures may also identify similar versions in other cultures. Upon research, we found that “Red River and Tengtiao River” told by the Hani People is shared by people in Myanmar, Laos, Thailand, and Vietnam. Another story in The Earth Stories Collection is recounted in Myanmar, Thailand, Iran, and Armenia, which is an even longer stretch of land. To me, it is heartwarming to see that these shared stories transcend national borders and also “cultural borders” within a country



Tengtiao River - Photo credit: Luo Xueping

[e.g., “borders” between/among the 56 ethnic groups or cultures within China], demonstrating that, we are after all, one human community sharing the experience on our one home, the planet Earth.

I was privileged to have the opportunity of exchange with storytellers, scholars, readers, and audience across the world in the webinar, “Turning the Story Upside Down” held on 12 October 2021. This webinar was part of The Scottish International Storytelling Festival (15th to 31st October) leading up to COP 26, the most critical Climate Change meeting ever held, in Glasgow. At this event, I shared the following story from the Jing culture in China accompanied by the traditional Jing music in the background.

Once upon a time, it was chaotic in the sea. Whales and sharks swallowed the weak at will. Those lacking resistance were going to die out. The Sea Dragon King was so worried about the situation that he decided to resume order in the Sea Kingdom.

He took his seat in the Crystal Palace. He ordered all aquatic animals to gather in the palace before sunset for a meeting. As more and more generals and soldiers arrived, the Sea Dragon King in his throne was staring at them and stroking his beard. He spoke solemnly, “In such a majestic sea kingdom, why do we have so many generals and so few soldiers?” The sharks and whales standing there, were shaking all over. They dared not to speak. Suddenly, all the weak aquatic animals including the octopuses, squids, crabs, prawns, horseshoe crabs knelt before the king. They told their stories of suffering, crying. A squid wiggling its soft and white body reported to the king, “We the weak aquatic animals are swallowed by the angry sharks and evil whales. We are dying out. We beg your majesty to grant us justice.” “Is it true?” The Sea Dragon King punched the table angrily. “It’s my order that from now on, whoever swallows up any aquatic citizens shall be executed.” The whales and sharks were scared and silent. The



Photo credit: "Joy of Fish" by Lin Zhenming

The squid continued, "Your majesty might not be aware that, they would swallow us without your knowledge. What was worse, there are killings within each species. No one dares to report to you." "Well..." The Sea Dragon King thought for the solution. He summoned the weak aquatic animal to come closer.

"Squids, you have a soft and tender body. I grant you a bag of ink. You hide it in your belly. In the event of danger, spit the ink to blind your predator, and you shall be safe."

"Crabs, you have already four pairs of legs. I grant you a pair of claws. You fix them on the front, and you can sweep your enemies with them."

"Horseshoe crabs, your eyesight is not that good. I grant you a sword. You hide it on the back. You can then deter your enemies."

"Octopuses, you have a soft and weak body. I grant you eight long legs.

You may attack your enemies with them, or simply run with these legs."

Finally, the Sea Dragon King advised all the weak aquatic animals, "All the weapons I granted you shall be your heirlooms. Keep them safe, and you must pass them on, from generation to generation."

Responding to the story as a storyteller, Donald Smith, Director of the Scottish Storytelling Centre and also Founder and Director of the Scottish International Storytelling Festival, acknowledged the principles of diversity and ecological balance as the underlying themes. As someone who lives and works in Scotland, a nation of the sea, he also articulated how the story resonated with his culture which is thousands of miles away from China and the Jing ethnic group. He explained that dragons appear elementally earthy and fiery in European traditions in contrast to Asian cultures. The next speaker, Judith Black, an American professional storyteller, remarked with wonder on how the dragon was demonised in one culture but venerated in another. Indeed, as human cultures on Earth impart knowledge through storytelling, both similar and various interpretations blaze new paths towards the future. When directed by the Earth Charter, a common set of values agreed upon by innumerable cultures and traditions, I truly believe we shall achieve a sustainable future for the community of life on Earth.



References

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Earth Collection Stories Website <https://theearthstoriescollection.org/en/home/>

Source of Image 1 Tengtiao River: <https://www.meipian.cn/1uuebyxt>

Source of Image 2 Joy of Fish by Lin Zhenming:
https://www.sohu.com/a/276986424_201909

Stories from China